

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY MANILA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 SINGAPORE 3186

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: EGEN, ASEAN, SN, US
SUBJECT: US-ASEAN MINISTERIAL MEETINGS: GOS INTERESTS AND
EXPECTATIONS

REF: (A) SINGAPORE 3095, (B) SINGAPORE 2979

1. SUMMARY: DISCUSSIONS WITH GOS OFFICIALS ABOUT
US-ASEAN WASHINGTON MEETING INDICATE BASIC AGREEMENT BETWEEN
GOS AND US OBJECTIVES: A STRONG REAFFIRMATION OF
US INTEREST IN SE ASIA AND ESTABLISHMENT OF FRAMEWORK
FOR STRENGTHENING US-ASEAN LINKAGES. GOS HAS BEEN
TRYING TO PERSUADE ASEAN PARTNERS TO PURSUE THESE
RATHER THAN SHORT-TERM "CONCRETE RESULTS". GOS
WOULD APPARENTLY PREFER NOT TO HAVE RESTRICTED
SESSIONS ON POLITICAL SUBJECTS. END SUMMARY.

2. OVER PAST FEW WEEKS, WE HAVE DISCUSSED GOS
INTERESTS AND EXPECTATIONS FOR AUGUST US-ASEAN
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MINISTERIAL MEETINGS WITH SEVERAL GOS OFFICIALS,
INCLUDING FOREIGN MINISTER RAJARATNAM, WHO WILL HEAD
GOS DELEGATION. MOST OF THESE DISCUSSIONS HAVE BEEN
REPORTED, BUT WE BELIEVE IT MAY BE USEFUL TO SUMMARIZE
OUR IMPRESSIONS AND TO ADD OUR COMMENTS.

3. BACKGROUND - SINGAPORE INTERESTS IN ASEAN. WHILE

SINGAPORE HAS SOME OBVIOUS ECONOMIC INTERESTS IN ASEAN, THE CORE OF THE APPLE IS POLITICAL. THIS HAS BEEN MADE CLEAR NOT ONLY IN PRIVATE TALKS WITH GOS OFFICIALS, BUT PUBLICLY BY PRIME MINISTER LEE IN RECENT INTERVIEW IN EUROMONEY. GOS SEES ASEAN BOTH AS PROTECTIVE SHIELD BEHIND WHICH DIFFERENCES WITH INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA IN PARTICULAR (BOTH UNFRIENDLY NEIGHBORS ON PAST OCCASIONS AND STILL POTENTIALLY DIFFICULT) CAN BE QUIETLY OVERCOME, AND AS A NON-COMMUNIST UNITED FRONT WHICH COULD IF NECESSARY OPPOSE SUBVERSION OR AGGRESSION FROM INDOCHINA. PM LEE IN EUROMONEY INTERVIEW SAID ASEAN "MUTES DIFFERENCES WHICH WOULD OTHERWISE BE EXPLOITED BY THOSE WHO WANT TO BREAK US UP; WHO DO NOT WANT TO SEE A GROUP OF NON-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES COOPERATING, HELPING EACH OTHER, PROPELLING EACH OTHER'S ECONOMY FORWARD".

4. AS WE SEE IT, SINGAPORE'S ECONOMIC INTERESTS IN ASEAN ARE ESSENTIALLY DEFENSIVE. SINGAPORE MUST BE IN ASEAN TO PROTECT ITS ENTREPOT FUNCTION AGAINST POTENTIAL ECONOMIC NATIONALISM IN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA, TO BE WITHIN RATHER THAN OUTSIDE OF INTRA-ASEAN TRADE PREFERENCE SYSTEM AND TO ENSURE THAT IT IS NOT EXCLUDED FROM WHATEVER MAY DEVELOP BY WAY OF INDUSTRIAL COMPLEMENTATION. SINGAPORE MIGHT WELL BE

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BETTER OFF ECONOMICALLY, HOWEVER, IN ABSENCE OF ASEAN TRADE PREFERENCES AND HAS FRANKLY OPPOSED INDUSTRIAL COMPLEMENTATION SCHEMES THAT WOULD INVOLVE PROTECTIONIST SHARING-OUT OF INDUSTRIAL SECTORS AND WOULD LIMIT FOREIGN INVESTMENT. IT THRIVES BEST ON FREE MARKETS AND PRIVATE ENTERPRISE. SINGAPORE PROBABLY CANNOT EXPECT TO GAIN MUCH THROUGH ASEAN MEMBERSHIP IN TERMS OF INCREASED EXPORTS OF ITS OWN MANUFACTURED GOODS TO ITS PARTNERS.

5. ON POSITIVE SIDE, ASEAN MEMBERSHIP LENDS ADDITIONAL STRENGTH TO GOS AND OTHER ASEAN COUNTRIES' VOICES VIS-A-VIS MAJOR POWERS AND WITHIN LDC COUNCILS. EVEN HERE, HOWEVER, THERE ARE PROBLEMS FOR SINGAPORE, SINCE COMMON POSITIONS FREQUENTLY REPRESENT INTERESTS MORE OF OTHER FOUR COUNTRIES, POORER AND WITH LARGE RURAL POPULATIONS, THAN OF SINGAPORE.

6. US-ASEAN DIALOGUE - GOS OBJECTIVES. GOS BELIEVES, AND HAS TRIED TO CONVINCE OTHER ASEAN COUNTRIES, THAT PRIMARY OBJECTIVE OF MINISTERIAL MEETINGS SHOULD BE TO OBTAIN STRONG REAFFIRMATION

OF US POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC INTEREST IN REGION AND
OF OUR SUPPORT FOR ASEAN AS VIABLE REGIONAL
ORGANIZATION. GOS RECOGNIZES THAT SOME OF ITS
PARTNERS SEEK SHORTER-TERM "CONCRETE RESULTS" AND HAS
TRIED TO IMPRESS ON THEM IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING
STRONG LONG-TERM COOPERATION WITH US. ONE OFFICIAL
(LEE CHIONG GIAM, DIRECTOR OF REGIONAL AND ECONOMIC
DIVISION OF MFA) SUGGESTS THAT WASHINGTON
PARTICIPANTS SHOULD TRY TO CREATE BROAD AND LASTING
INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUCH COOPERATION.
RECOGNIZING THAT OTHER ASEAN COUNTRIES WILL RAISE
TRADITIONAL NORTH/SOUTH ISSUES (PARTLY FOR HOME
AND G-77 CONSUMPTION), LEE ADVISES USG TO "TRY NOT
TO GENERATE HEAT" OVER THESE ISSUES BUT TO FOCUS ON
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FINDING CLOSER APPROACHES TO SOLUTIONS FOR KEY
BLOCKAGES IN INDUSTRIALIZED-DEVELOPING COUNTRY
DIALOGUE IN RELATIVELY NON-CONFRONTATIONAL ATMOSPHERE
OF US-ASEAN TALKS. HE ADDS THAT USG SHOULD ALSO TRY
TO FIND WAYS OF INCREASING MARKET ACCESS FOR AND
PROMOTING US INVESTMENT IN ASEAN AS MOST
PROMISING AVENUE FOR FINDING "CONCRETE RESULTS".

7. WE PROBED LEE FOR ANY INTEREST IN PRIVATE
POLITICAL TALKS. HE SAID THAT FONMIN RAJARATNAM
"MAY WISH TO DISCUSS POLITICAL ITEMS" BUT STEERED
CLEAR OF IDEA OF RESTRICTED SESSIONS ON POLITICAL
MATTERS, NOTING THAT ECONOMICS AND POLITICS ARE
INSEPARABLE IN SINGAPORE'S VIEW OF ASEAN AND ITS
RELATIONSHIP WITH MAJOR POWERS. MFA POLITICAL
DIRECTOR TAN BOON SENG HAD EARLIER ALSO INDICATED
GOS COOLNESS TOWARD RESTRICTED TALKS.

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8. COMMENT: GOS SEEMS TO BE PRETTY MUCH ON OUR OWN WAVE-LENGTH AS TO KEY PURPOSE OF US-ASEAN MEETINGS, AND SHARES OUR CONCERN THAT OTHER ASEAN COUNTRIES WILL PERSIST IN SHORTER-TERM VIEW THAT MEETINGS SHOULD GIVE MINISTERS SOMETHING TANGIBLE TO TAKE HOME. OTHER POSTS WILL BE BETTER ABLE TO COMMENT ON WHETHER OTHER ASEAN COUNTRIES REALLY EXPECT CHANGES IN US POSITIONS ON COMMON FUND, STABEX, ETC., OR MERELY BELIEVE THAT THEY MUST RAISE THESE ISSUES FOR G-77 CONSUMPTION. WE SEE GOS INTEREST IN US-ASEAN RELATIONSHIP, LIKE ITS INTEREST IN ASEAN ITSELF, AS FUNDAMENTALLY POLITICAL, ALTHOUGH GOS WOULD NATURALLY HOPE TO FIND USG FORTHCOMING ON ECONOMIC ISSUES AS EARNEST OF OUR INTENTIONS TO SUPPORT ASEAN. FOREIGN MINISTER RAJARATNAM TOLD US THAT BEST TIME TO SUPPORT ASEAN IS NOW, WHEN IT IS GROWING STRONGER AND IS UNDER NO IMMEDIATE THREAT. THIS SEEMS TO US SENSIBLE ADVICE.

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9. WE BELIEVE THAT THERE IS BOUND TO BE CONTINUED AMBIVALENCE IN US-ASEAN RELATIONS FOR TWO MAIN REASONS: A) ASEAN WANTS A STRONG US PRESENCE IN SE ASIA BUT DOES NOT WANT TO FORECLOSE POSSIBILITY OF BETTER RELATIONS WITH CHINA, USSR AND INDO-CHINA BY ANY APPEARANCE OF DEPENDENCY ON OR SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH US; B) ASEAN COUNTRIES AS G-77 MEMBERS MUST CONTINUE TO ENDORSE G-77 OBJECTIVES, SOME OF WHICH (AS THEY KNOW) WE CANNOT ACCEPT. THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH THIS AMBIVALENCE; IT INDEED SERVES OUR INTERESTS FOR ASEAN TO MAINTAIN ITS CREDENTIALS AS A FULLY INDEPENDENT REGIONAL GROUP, AS DOES ASEAN'S (ESPECIALLY SINGAPORE'S) MODERATING INFLUENCE IN G-77 FORA. BUT IT NECESSARILY ENTAILS AN ARM'S LENGTH RELATIONSHIP, DESPITE FACT THAT IN CASE OF SOME ASEAN COUNTRIES--INCLUDING SINGAPORE--

BILATERAL RELATIONS ARE CLOSE.

10. IT OCCURS TO US THAT GOS AMONG ASEAN COUNTRIES MAY EXPECT THE MOST RATHER THAN THE LEAST FROM DIALOGUE. WHILE IT HAS NO GREAT HOPES FOR IMMEDIATE TANGIBLE ECONOMIC BENEFITS, IT HAS BEEN WORKING TO BRING ABOUT SAME RESULTS AS WE HOPE FOR: A HEIGHTENED USG AWARENESS OF ASEAN'S NEEDS AND PURPOSES AND A FRAMEWORK FOR STRENGTHENING LONG-TERM US-ASEAN LINKAGES. THIS OBJECTIVE FOLLOWS NATURALLY FROM VIEW OFTEN EXPRESSED BY PRIME MINISTER LEE THAT "SINGAPORE IS PLUGGED IN TO YOUR GRID"; THAT IT IS IRREVOCABLY COMMITTED TO THE WEST AND ESPECIALLY THE US.

11. ON APPARENT RELUCTANCE TO CONSIDER RESTRICTED SESSIONS ON POLITICAL MATTERS DURING DIALOGUE, WE
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SUGGEST TWO REASONS: A) GOS PREFERS TO KEEP ITS POLITICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH US ON BILATERAL BASIS TO AVOID "CLEARANCES" WITH THOSE OTHER ASEAN GOVERNMENTS WHICH DO NOT FULLY SHARE ITS ATTITUDES TOWARD THE US; B) IT MAY FEAR THAT WORD OF POLITICAL TALKS MIGHT LEAK TO PUBLIC AND TARNISH ASEAN'S NON-ALIGNED IMAGE. GOS WOULD CERTAINLY BE RELUCTANT TO HOLD PRIVATE DISCUSSIONS WITH USG OFFICIALS DURING DIALOGUE IF OTHER ASEAN GOVERNMENTS WERE NOT INCLUDED.
INGRAHAM

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